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ABSTRACT

A study examined 78 experienced Northwest Ohio elementary school teachers' orientation toward whole language, teacher-made, and state-mandated tests. The teachers also described their grading policies and distributions and their attitudes toward basal readers and phonics skills. The majority (56%) labeled themselves as over 50% "whole language" in their teaching of reading and language arts. Grade level taught and years of experience did not relate to orientation toward whole language. Those with stronger orientation toward "whole language" tended to be more negative toward testing, the value of phonics skills, and the use of basal readers. Seatwork and tests appeared to dominate as sources for assignments of grades, followed by homework. Few, however, used information from portfolios as a source of grades. Most (81%) did assign A, B, C grades on report cards, but 46% reported skill levels on report cards, and 31% reported improvement grades or ratings. Major concerns focused upon: using portfolios to report to parents and other teachers; having to grade students; and learning more about whole language teaching. Few seemed to worry about the validity of their assessment procedures. (Three tables of data are included.) (Author/RS)

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In Transition Toward Whole Language Instruction

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Abstract

Seventy-eight experienced Northwest Ohio elementary school teachers were questioned concerning their orientation toward whole language, teacher-made and state-mandated tests. They also described their grading policies and distributions and their attitudes toward basal readers and phonics skills. The majority (56%) labeled themselves as over 50% "whole language" in their teaching of reading and language arts. Grade level taught and years of experience did not relate to orientation toward whole language. Those with stronger orientation toward "whole language" tended to be more negative toward: 1) testing; 2) the value of phonics skills; and 3) the use of basal readers. Seatwork and tests appeared to dominate as sources for assignments of grades -- followed by homework. Few, however, used information from portfolios as a source of grades. Most (81%) did assign A, B, C grades on report cards, but 46% reported skill levels on report cards, and 31% reported improvement grades or ratings. Major concerns focused upon: using portfolios to report to parents and other teachers; having to grade students; and learning more about whole language teaching. Few seemed to worry about the validity of their assessment procedures.

In Transition Toward Whole Language Instruction

Relatively recent analyses of American education have viewed the educational system as one "in crisis." The most evident solution to date has been the mandating of various minimum-competency tests by the great majority of states. Similar tests originating from the federal government are in process. Ohio obligates students to demonstrate "ninth-grade" levels of performance in citizenship and in the three Rs as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma. Other proficiency tests of the three Rs are required in the elementary grades. This focus upon testing and tested performance is evident in several of the America 2000 goals.

The Wingspread Conference on Assessment last spring (1992) added a different focus in their strong suggestion that assessment should be "more than testing, measurement, or evaluation," but should: "actively involve the participants"; "be intertwined with learning and teaching so it becomes motivating and informative, not threatening or confusing"; "help students learn to monitor their own performance... to become independent and self-regulated learners"; "be learner-centered"; "be developmentally appropriate"; and "give credibility to the diverse talents and backgrounds of students" (McCombs, Lambert, Farley & Spielberger, 1992, p. 1).

This potential shift in focus from <u>testing</u> as an external motivator and standards-setter to <u>assessment</u> as adaptive, learner-centered, and intertwined with learning and teaching may represent a potential conflict for teachers, future teachers, and those who teach future teachers (one of the authors of this paper is

currently an English teacher while the other two authors teach assessment classes in a teacher preparation program in one of Ohio's universities).

The primary purpose of this study was to begin to explore this possible conflict in orientation to assessment and testing by questioning experienced elementary teachers as to their current opinions, beliefs, and practices regarding testing, grading, and assessment. The relatively recent and rapid movement toward "whole language" teaching -- and its associated alternate approaches to assessment -- appeared to offer a potential platform upon which to base these questions. "Whole language teaching" would seem to require a shift from the traditional, objective testing of particular skills to a more holistic assessment of student products, performances, and progress. "Whole language" also is focused upon two of the crucial and central three Rs measured in the various Ohio mandated tests, and "whole language" approaches appear to be increasing in popularity in Northwest Ohio elementary schools. This relatively new emphasis upon whole language was believed to provide a situation in which teachers would differ concerning their implementation and liking for the approach. A secondary purpose involved determining the degree to which experienced, elementary teachers perceived themselves to be "whole language" in orientation--and the degree to which affiliation with whole language related to their attitudes toward tests, basals, phonics and related areas.

A previous study by Wood, Bennett, Wood, and Bennett (1990) indicated that 258 experienced Northwest Ohio teachers already tended to "intertwine" learning and assessment in that they frequently failed

to differentiate between formative and summative evaluation. The same study also reported that those school teachers in "performance" areas, such as music, physical education, art, and industrial education, tended to be more liberal in their grading policies while also weighing student progress and student attitudes more heavily in their assignment of course grades.

Hypotheses.

(1) It was hypothesized that experienced elementary teachers would differ in their reported implementation of a whole language orientation to teaching reading and language arts -- because of the comparative newness of the approach and because of the unevenness with which new ideas tend to spread.

(2) It was hypothesized that those teachers who reported a greater orientation toward whole language would tend to produce somewhat higher grades on report cards and would weigh student attitudes and student progress or improvement somewhat more heavily than teachers less oriented toward whole language. This hypothesis was an extension of the previous finding that more performance-oriented teachers tended to function as more liberal graders who tended to focus more upon attitudes and improvement and somewhat less upon normative indicators of comparative achievement. Whole language teachers could be considered to be more oriented toward whole performances and, therefore, more similar to art or music teachers. Teachers less oriented toward whole language approaches could be thought of as being more like traditional teachers who weight attitudes less and assign somewhat fewer high grades.

(3) Teachers with a greater whole language orientation were expected to be more negative toward the use of skills-based proficiency tests in that these tests tend to focus upon isolated skills rather than whole products.

(4) Teachers with a greater whole language orientation should value basal readers and phonics-based activities to a lesser degree.

(5) Whole language teachers would be expected to use portfolios more often and to weigh the results of these portfolios more heavily in their reading and language arts grades. Portfolios tend to be a technique which permits teachers to collect work samples for the dual purposes of grading and reporting progress to students and parents.

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight experienced elementary teachers from Northwest Ohio responded to a set of questions regarding their teaching. Their years of service ranged from five teachers who had taught for three years to three teachers who were in their 34th year of teaching (mean = 15.1 years, SD = 8.6 years). Six teachers taught kindergarten, 10 were first grade teachers, 23 taught second grade, and from 7 to 11 taught in each of the grades from 3 to 6 (three taught reading and language arts in the seventh grade). Class sizes ranged from 13 to 90 (Mean = 26, Median = 24.5) with the larger numbers taught by the sixth and seventh grade teachers.

Questions Asked

Teachers were asked to report upon their class sizes, grade levels taught, and years of experience. They were asked to estimate the degree to which they were "believers in the 'whole language'

approach." Grading policies, weighting of sources of information, grade distributions, and attitudes toward tests were also explored. Many of the questions could be answered briefly, and these answers were converted to numbers. These questions (and answer patterns) are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Teachers also were asked to provide opinions concerning whole language, testing, grading and related areas. Typical opinions are presented in Table 3.

Results

Table 1 presents teacher answers to 10 questions regarding experience, grading of reading and language arts, and the degree to which teachers considered themselves to be "whole language" teachers.

Hypothesis 1: Differences in Orientation to Whole Language. As hypothesized, teachers did differ in their orientations toward whole language. Only 12% labeled themselves as 40% or less "whole language" teachers; approximately a third labeled themselves as 50% "whole language"; and over half (56%) labeled themselves as from 60% to 100% "whole language" in their orientation to teaching reading and language arts.

Hypothesis 2: Assignment of Grades. There were no significant correlations between orientation toward whole language (WL) and assignment of high (A or B) or low (D or F) grades. Correlations between orientation toward WL and increased weighting of student interest and effort in grading were positive but slight (r = .28 and .26, respectively).

Hypothesis 3: Whole Language and Attitudes Toward Tests. Four attitude questions focused upon the value of state-mandated and teacher-made tests. Teachers who reported themselves as more oriented

toward whole language t[illegible]ge tended to have slightly more negative attitudes towards tests in genera[illegible]neral (r = -.26, p < .05).

Hypothesis 4: Val[illegible] Value of Basal and Phonics Activities. Teachers with stronger orientati[illegible]tations toward whole language were less positive: (1) toward the "soundin[illegible]nding out the parts" of unknown words; (2) toward the use of basal reader[illegible]aders; and (3) toward the value of phonics skills for their students (r r[illegible](r ranged from -.3 to -.44).

Hypothesis 5: Use[illegible] Use of Portfolios. Stronger orientation toward whole language correlat[illegible]elated with a more positive attitude toward the use of portfolios in parent[illegible]rent conferences (r = .4) and to assess students (r = .32). Work in por[illegible] portfolios tended to be weighted somewhat more heavily when whole lang[illegible]language teachers assigned grades -- although over half of the teachers (6[illegible]s (63.5%) reported not using work in portfolios in their assignment of gra[illegible]grades.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Agreement-Disagreement[illegible]ent

Table 2 presents [illegible]ts 21 questions asked of all teachers. The table also includes teacher [illegible]er responses and correlation of these response with degree of orientation t[illegible]n toward whole language instruction.

The teachers were[illegible]ere most likely to agree that: (1) reading and language arts should be[illegible] be integrated; (2) portfolios do help in explaining progress to [illegible] to parents; (3) they (the teachers) were moving toward a whole-language[illegible]age approach; and (4) students tend to learn from discussing their work w[illegible]k with one another.

Disagreement was most notable to the ideas that: (1) reading and language arts be taught as separate subjects; (2) the use of standardized tests should improve teaching or learning in reading and language arts; (3) the new high school tests will improve learning; and (4) the teacher is uncomfortable with current grading or reporting procedures.

Correlates of Whole-Language Orientation

Teachers who were more oriented toward whole language were less satisfied with the use of tests to improve education or to improve reporting to parents. These teachers were also less in agreement with the need to sound-out words or use basal readers or phonics. Those who reported greater whole language orientations were more positive toward the use of portfolios in parent conferences and integration across subjects. Greater orientation toward whole language was not associated with: (1) grade level or with (2) higher or lower grade distributions, but was (3) positively but slightly related to a tendency to increase the weighting of student interest, and (4) a tendence to decrease the weighting of comparative achievement in the formulation of course grades. Teachers more oriented toward whole language tended to weigh homework and seatwork somewhat less when assigning grades in reading. Teachers who reported that they strongly agreed that they were "basically whole language teachers" also tended to strongly agree that they were "uncomfortable with our school's grading and report-card procedures" (r = .43).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Some Conclusions and Comments

Various types of holistic and action-oriented approaches to learning have cycled through education every few years. Montessori techniques have lasted to some degree for the entire century; "Progressive Education" and Dewey-based orientations were popular in the 1930s; the "British-Infant" school movement and the "integrated-day" swept in (and out again) in the 1960s and 1970s; and now, "Whole Language," "developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)", and "authentic learning" are increasing in popularity (see Wakefield, 1933 for DAP ideas and the April, 1993, issue of Educational Leadership for authentic learning articles). This new wave appears to be supported by a depth and range of teacher-support materials and assessment approaches that tended to have been absent in earlier eras. Although most of these Northwest Ohio teachers seem to have had little official support for a movement toward "whole language," the majority seem to favor what they believe to be "a whole language" orientation. Many seem to be actively seeking help in their efforts. However, unless careful definition and analysis of these approaches and their outcomes actually demonstrate increased levels of function and/or student or teacher interest, whole language and DAP and "authentic learning" may go the way of former movements. Unlike the "fringe" nature of many former movements, "whole language" seems to be a strong, grassroots, bottom-up, phenomenon.

Although schools seem able to introduce these integrative approaches with little change in traditional administrative procedures, teachers responding to our questions generally supported system changes: (1) which would permit teachers to be freed from their own teaching at times in order to observe how other teachers taught -- and to engage in workshops and post-workshop follow-ups; (2) which were a shift away from letter or percent grades in the elementary grades; and (3) which involved a reduction in mandated, externally created, objective testing. Many of these teachers favored whole language approaches but seemed to need administrative and curricular support to fully implement their ideas.

Warning: It is entirely possible that teachers who reported themselves as whole language teachers actually used whole language approaches to a lesser degree than they believed they used them. It is not uncommon for college teachers to report that they were leading discussions while their students perceived them to be lecturing. Similar misperceptions of their own functioning may be true of many elementary school teachers.

Concern: Very few of these elementary teachers appeared to be overly concerned with their ability to validly assess achievement via portfolios, seatwork, homework and their observation of student behavior. Studies reported by Hoge and Coladarie (1989) do seem to indicate that many teachers often are valid judges of student achievement. However, Airasian (1991) makes a very strong case for the possibility of frequent teacher bias associated with informal judgments of student aptitude, achievement and personality. If portfolios and similarly subjectively scored procedures begin to be

more employed in high-stakes evaluation, there should be more attention paid to the validity of the judgments based upon them. Even if many teachers can make valid and unbiased assessments, there is little reason to believe that all teachers are similarly unbiased.

Additional information can be obtained from Peter Wood or Thomas Bennett, EDFI Department, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403 (419-372-7328).

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Table 1

Participant Descriptors

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1. Grade Level Taught?

   K = 8% 1 = 13% 2 = 30% 3 = 10%

   4 = 13% 5 = 14% 6 = 9% 7 = 4%

2. Years of Teaching Experience?

   3 to 5 = 20.5% 6 to 10 = 11.5%

   13 to 16 = 35.8% 17 to 25 = 20.6%

   Over 25 years = 11.4%

   Mean = 15.1 years Median = 15 years

3. Number of Students?

   13 to 21 = 20.5% 22 to 25 = 45%

   26 to 32 = 18% 45 to 90 = 8%

   Mean = 26.2 students Median = 24.5 students

4. Degree to Which You are a "Whole Language" Teacher?

   10 to 40% WL = 12% 50% WL = 32.5%

   51 to 75% WL = 31% Over 75% WL = 25%

   Mean = 63.2% WL Median = 60% WL

Table 1 (continued)

5. What Information Goes on Your Report Cards?

81% = ABC grades	17% = % grades
46% = Skills Lists	28% = Effort Ratings/Grades
31% = Improvement Ratings/Grades	10% = Other

6. Percent of Reading Grade that is Based Upon:

Homework (0 to 45%)

Mean = 10.4% Median = 10%

Seatwork (0 to 95%)

Mean = 37% Median = 33%

Tests and Quizzes (0 to 50%)

Mean = 29.4% Median = 30%

Portfolio Work (0 to 80%)

Mean = 9% Median = 0%

Student Interest and Effort (0 to 30%)

Mean = 7% Median = 0%

Attendance (0 to 50%)

Mean = .3% Median = 0%

Table 1 (continued)

7. Approximate Percent of Students Assigned:

Grade	Reading			Language Arts		
A	(8 to 95%)	M=39%	Md=30%	(0 to 100%)	M=40%	Md=35%
B	(5 to 60%)	M=37%	Md=40%	(0 to 60%)	M=36%	Md=40%
C	(0 to 50%)	M=20%	Md=20%	(0 to 50%)	M=19%	Md=17%
D	(0 to 12%)	M=3%	Md=0%	(0 to 12%)	M=4%	Md=1%
F	(0 to 6%)	M=.5%	Md=0%	(0 to 5%)	M=.5%	Md=0%

8. Percent of Reading Grade Based Upon:

Improvement	(0 to 100%)	M = 21%	Md = 10%
Effort	(0 to 100%)	M = 23%	Md = 20%
Level of Achievement	(0 to 100%)	M = 49%	Md = 60%

9. Number of Times Meet with Other Teachers (Yearly) to Discuss Teaching/Evaluation/Grading of Reading and Language Arts

0 = 26.4%	1-2 = 14%	3-5 = 18%
6-10 = 17%	12 or more = 17%	
Mean = 10 meetings/yr.	Md = 4 meetings/yr.	

10. Have Meeting Frequencies Increased Over Recent Years?

Decreased	20%
Same	45%
Increased	45%

Table 2

Teacher Responses to 21 Questions (N = 78)

	Statements/Questions	Percent Response: Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	(3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	SD	Corr. with W.L.
1.	The use of standardized tests like those now required in grades 4, 6, and 8 should improve teaching and/or learning in **reading** and **language arts**.	15%	54%	8%	19%	4%	2.4	1.1	–
2.	**Reading** and **language arts** can be taught more effectively when they are taught as separate subjects.	35	62	1	3	0	1.7	.06	-.3
3.	Teacher-made tests of students' competencies and skills help me to teach **reading** and **language arts** better.	5	12	10	62	11	3.6	1.0	–
4.	I learn more from portfolios of student work than I do from test results.	0	9	8	62	22	4.0	0.8	+.3
5.	Test results help me to explain student progress to parents.	4	12	9	63	13	3.7	1.0	-.4
6.	Portfolios of student work help me to explain student progress to parents.	0	4	8	45	44	4.3	0.8	–
7.	Both **reading** and **language arts** tend to be learned better when they are integrated and taught together.	0	1	5	47	46	4.4	0.6	+.4
8.	The new high school graduation tests should improve student learning.	17	33	26	23	1	2.6	1.1	-.3

Table 2 (continued)

	Statements/Questions	Percent Response: Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	(3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	SD	Corr. with W.L.
9.	My students tend to learn from discussing their work with one another.	0	6	4	63	27	4.1	0.7	–
10.	Materials for early reading should be written in natural language without concern for short, simple words and sentences.	1	17	8	53	22	3.8	1.0	–
11.	When children do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts.	4	24	8	54	10	3.4	1.1	-.4
12.	I am basically a "whole language" teacher.	0	49	4	39	9	3.1	1.1	+.65
13.	It is important for future elementary teachers to have good phonic skills.	0	12	5	72	12	3.8	0.8	-.3
14.	It is important for future elementary teachers to know how to use basal readers.	4	33	6	51	5	3.2	1.1	-.44
15.	It is important for my students to have good phonic skills.	0	10	5	77	8	3.8	0.7	-.4
16.	I am uncomfortable with our school's grading and report card procedures.	1	63	1	27	8	2.8	1.1	–

Table 2 (continued)

	Statements/Questions	Percent Response: Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	(3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	SD	Corr. with W.L.
17.	When coming on to a word that's unknown, the reader should be encouraged to guess its meaning and move on.	6	22	10	54	8	3.3	1.1	--
18.	I have no major problems in explaining student progress to parents.	4	12	0	71	14	3.8	1.0	--
19.	I'm moving more towards a whole language approach.	0%	6%	13%	54%	27%	4.0	0.8	.36
20.	Our school administrators are encouraging movement toward a whole language approach.	0	9	20	54	18	3.8	0.8	--
21.	I am tending to shift my teaching to meet the new state testing requirements.	1	30	20	35	15	3.3	1.1	-.3

Note: (1) The last column in the table provides correlation coefficients between degree of "Whole Language Orientation" and agreement with 21 statements. Non-significant (.05) correlations were not reported. Positive correlations indicate that the more whole language teachers were more in agreement with the statement.

Table 3

Typical Responses to Open-ended Questions Concerning Whole Language, Testing and Grading

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Teacher Comments

The majority of teacher comments tended to fall into four categories:

(1) Why assign grades? ("It is necessary to get away from the A, B, C competition." "A, B, C, D, F grades are what parents expect and understand. However, I think other ways of evaluating reading would be much better at my grade level." "Keeping grades is a check for me. We used to use only S, S-U, and no letter grades.... It turns out the same either way." "I would rather use a checklist format that involves checking off skills mastered." "Skills need to be evaluated, but students shouldn't be in competition for grades." "Assessment must be ongoing and a part of daily/weekly activities.... We must move away from Orwellian communication...and use of a code called grades." "I wish I did not have to give letter grades."

Table 3 (continued)

(2) Enjoyment with shifting to whole language and alternate assessment: "I enjoy using fewer tests and more portfolio-style assessment." "I think portfolio assessment is best. I'm just beginning to use this approach." "Each child has to be assessed on his own achievement.... Assessment is more realistic and reflects knowledge that is internalized." "In our present system we use a traditional approach, but many teachers are very interested in change." "Whole language is interesting, fun to teach, motivating, and the way many children best learn." "Whole language produces better thinkers and writers and helps the child to see the important correlations of all language arts subjects across the entire curriculum."

(3) Problems with assigning grades and describing student progress to parents and other teachers: "It is difficult to assign letter grades (via portfolios)." "Parents and other teachers still want to know the grade."

Table 3 (continued)

(4) A desire to combine methods: "There are many positive aspects to a whole language philosophy, but I still feel that skills help some students. I'm more comfortable with a literature-based approach -- supplementing a good basal program." "Whole language is fine for those who feel comfortable with it. However, it's not the only way to teach reading. Reading can effectively be taught with a basal reader." "Whole language has merit -- uses good ideas. I believe in using a mixture of teaching techniques." "I believe whole language/phonics/basals and many other forms should be used to allow every learner the opportunity to learn in a manner that is comfortable to them...use the method easiest for them."